

## Back Again, Back Again: Horse and Rider

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[**FX:** voices chatter in the background. Music begins, a simple repeating pattern, bright and cheery. It is “Nightingales” by Pierce Murphy.]

**Abigail, as the intro:** Back Again, Back Again, episode twenty-seven: Where Is Your Rider?

[**FX:** Music fades out. A click of a cassette tape-style recorder turns on, and the machine begins to whirr underneath the rest of the audio.]

**Ilyaas:** Riders, in every direction. They took more than half our total horses. They flew out of our camp with a sketch of the boy, because Leander had even *pictured* him, vaguely, flashes of face and flashes of features that we’d tried to reconstruct. They carried the instruction to bring him to our camp. I was aware of how much our approach, desperate as it was, echoed the way that I’d been snatched up by the kings upon my arrival and taken and turned into a weapon. I’d felt the unease in my stomach, even as I’d sat beside Leander and folded my fingers through theirs and tilted my head onto their shoulder as they described him to Nat to draw. I wanted to say, *don’t force*

*him. I wanted to say, don't blindfold him, don't scare him, don't knock his knees out from under him. You can't. Please. God, please.* But I couldn't. Because - because, because, listeners, no matter the supplications I claim now, they stayed in my mind while I was in Rhysea for a reason. I was terrified of the very *idea* of him in our camp. I choked over the thought that he could take my magic. I couldn't hold the idea that he could take my life.

And yet I also know that it would be worse for Cassian to own him. Cassian would - own - The Boy if he was caught by the kings first, the same way they'd owned Rhia, the same way they'd owned me. An eye wasn't a loss if who you took it from was yours to do with as you wished. Theft - of magic, of time, of autonomy, dignity - it didn't matter. Any of it. Not to the kings, and Cassian stood with the kings.

And yet - what were we proposing? To steal him away back here only for me to shy away from him at every step? To kill him, if he was too much of a threat? How could we even qualify just some *boy*, as useless at Rhysean as I had been a year ago, confused, unsteady, and reaching for magic, as a threat? How could we justify that?

We couldn't. Callia had given me the ultimatum, because she - she cared about me, she cared about my fear, and she wanted to

soothe me. She wanted to let me know that I would not become useless.

Because I was, really, terrified of becoming useless. I don't know - I felt, nonsensically, selfishly, horribly, *betrayed*, by the magic, by the prophecy, by Rhysea itself. It was my savior complex acting up, that thing I wanted to crush and had not - *of course I am not enough to save this world. Of course. Of course. Of course.*

As if he diminished my worth. As if I was rendered obsolete by his coming. I didn't want him to join us - I worried that this boy would be me but better in every way, that the tentative friendships and the tentative place I'd found here would be taken away. But I think - really, it was the birthday fear, turned on its side. Really, it was the same fear as it had always been, as it is, even now: that this world, the one that we speak in, dear listener, would claim me again. That he'd see me, we'd lock eyes, and - I'd be back in my bed, twelve-oh-three, seventeen and everything a dream and me, trapped on the wrong side of it. But my selfishness was not enough to end a boy's life. That was *deskinan* - murder. It was impossible to make something righteous of that. I did not want to bear that weight again.

But there were other ways to avoid the things I feared - of course. Cassian and I discussed this, back at Leander's rescue.

There was always omission. We could not tell him how he fit into the prophecy, if he came — though, that did not sit right with me either. We could let him stand with us. We could treat him with kindness, as an equal, as if none of us needed fear him. But no option unmade that word, *take*, and I was afraid.

I didn't want him at the camp. But no one, myself included, knew what else to do. There was only the desperate hope that we could find The Boy before we met with the laerds (four days, now, not long, that was not a lot of time to track down a boy in all of a country), that Cassian would not have any announcements before we met with the laerds (they would not back a lost cause. We would be a lost cause), that everything would somehow, miraculously, work out.

[Silence.]

You know he kills me, listeners, and I will not even pretend that I ever felt any love for The Boy. I only tell you this now so you can see how it could have been. You do not have to guess how this turns out.

Three days, and no word back. Two days, then one. It was the night before we were supposed to meet the laerds, to — convince them? Woo them? We were out of time.

But there was nothing else to do. We couldn't back down from the best opportunity we'd been given. There was solace in the fact that Cassian had not made an announcement, that he had

not presented The Boy before the masses of the capital. And so - it was a matter of *roreala*, *shimmer*, and hope, and hope, and hope, that he stayed gone.

So - we did what we had done before our quest to woo Ocella Llanura.

We gathered in Callia's tent. Her anxiety swallowed up that raucous and disbelieving hope. She'd found the catch, she'd found the way we could be destroyed, once more, and as she held out a package, wrapped, to Leander and I both, I pretended not to notice how her hands trembled. My fingers brushed hers as I took the gift. I tried to say, with just the tips of my fingers, that I was there. That, as an extension of our constant loans of trust - the ones that she, Iolo, and I had made when I tried for the last time to turn Cassian, the one we'd made where I'd trusted Leander, and she'd trusted me - I tried to say that because of these, I would not leave her side for as long as she could stand it. I tried to say that where she could not find the calm, I could give it.

We dressed in our best. That was the present inside of each package - a dress, for me, even though I'd had no reason to wear them, here, with my sword constantly in my hands and my ankles doused in mud. There were careful chains of flowering vines around the neckline, the sleeves, the hem. The fabric itself was a soft rusty pink, a color neatly created from the fallen bark

of a spindly Rhysean tree. Thin laces across the back pulled it in to size. The skirt was fuller than was practical, wasteful, two more sloping panels built into it than was strictly necessary, but that made it beautiful, beautiful.

Callia was written into the hems and the flowers. This was her work. Everyone did embroidery, if they had the time, if they had the resources. I'd always assumed, because of her work, that she was the exception.

The way she proffered it, though – self-conscious, slightly hesitant, all of that desperately coated over with a thin layer of indifference – told me I'd been mistaken.

*Oh, I said. Callia, it's beautiful.*

Her lower jaw jutted out, and she seemed to roll her words around her mouth before she let them go. *We should be well-dressed. To impress the laerds. It is not the finery that you would have found with the* – she stopped, cutting off the jab before it could find its mark. *Gratinoc.*

Leander pulled out a vest, similarly embroidered, in a soft yellow dye. I'd helped Silas, back when she was alive, save the skins of a root vegetable to make dye like this. They smiled, softly, and traced their fingers over it. *Thank you, Callia. For your time and your care.*

Callia hesitated, then surged forward and pulled both of us into a hug, burying their face into Leander's shoulder and

pulling me in by my waist. *I will not pretend that I am not afraid*, she said. *But I am much less so with the two of you beside me.*

Leander tangled their fingers into Callia's hair and pressed a kiss to her forehead. *What will happen is what always will have happened. Fear will not change it. Love will see it through.*

That was more faith than I was willing to put into destiny - more than Callia was, either, I could tell. But they were calming, and they were steady, in this moment, still as they almost never were, and that was reassurance enough.

*Get dressed*, Callia said, pulling back. *Pack your things. We must ride out soon.*

I caught their hands and squeezed, hoping, and hoping, and hoping that nothing would go wrong.

**[Nightingales by Pierce Murphy, a light and rhythmic song, fades in.]**

**Abigail, as the outro:** Back Again, Back Again is written and produced by me, Abigail Eliza. If you're enjoying the show, please consider leaving a review on your podcast platform of choice or supporting Back Again, Back Again on Patreon at [patreon.com/backagainpodcast](https://patreon.com/backagainpodcast), where you'll gain access to

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If you've made it this far, thanks for sticking around. I know it can be hard to find joy in anything when the world weighs heavy, but dear one, it is there, and it is waving its arms for you to see. Try to let yourself rest in the small moments of peace. They will carry you through.

You are so, so loved. I hope you have a wonderful day.